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PREPARATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 44/228 AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT OTHER RELEVANT GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS: RECENT ACTIONS OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND OTHER BODIES OF RELEVANCE TO THE PREPARATORY PROCESS

SOIL CONSERVATION: LAND LOSS

A challenge for the African countries engaged in drought and desertification control

Report on the activities of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory**

1. Until now, the national, regional and international efforts undertaken in Africa to control desertification have not always had the desired effect, and improved international coordination in this area is becoming a priority.

2. It was in July 1989, at the Summit of the Arch, that the President of the French Republic therefore proposed the establishment of the Sahel and Sahara

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* See A/CONF.151/PC/96.

** This report has been prepared by the Sahel and Sahara Observatory in response to the request by the Preparatory Committee at its third session.

Observatory. The project won the political endorsement of the seven major industrialized countries, a commitment later renewed at the London Summit in July 1991.

3. The recommendations made at the symposium launching the project, held at Paris in July 1990, and the numerous consultations with partners from North and South made it possible to conceive of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory as a regional framework for consultation, coordination and partnership and to define its objectives.

4. The Sahel and Sahara Observatory is neither a fund nor an executing agency; it is a tool for liaison, for building on existing achievements and for strengthening solidarity so as to consolidate a genuine regional space. Its aim is to implement a programme of joint, concerted activities for all the countries of North, East and West Africa that border on the Sahara.

5. In addition to the marked interest shown by the African countries concerned and by their regional organizations, 1/ a process of consultation with the partners of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory (in the case of the North, the seven major industrialized countries) has been promoted by France and by the provisional structure since July 1990, resulting in participation by Canada, Germany, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the regional organizations of West and East Africa and the countries of North Africa.

6. The participation of these countries and organizations is motivated by the originality of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory as a transregional initiative aimed at meeting the same challenge, that of drought and desertification.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE SAHEL AND SAHARA OBSERVATORY

7. In order to perform this role of integrating liaison, follow-up, regular exchanges of information, harmonization, expertise and forging of closer links between the three subregions, the Sahel and Sahara Observatory has the following objectives:

(a) To promote cooperation and exchanges among the three subregions of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory in order to consolidate a genuine regional space;

(b) To develop and strengthen African research and development capacities;

(c) To arrive at an overall picture and a reliable analysis of desertification.

8. To that end, the Sahel and Sahara Observatory is seeking:

(a) To contribute to the exploitation, evaluation and consolidation of existing achievements;

(b) To support efforts to formulate national and regional priorities in response to needs and to promote comprehensive approaches; to contribute to the implementation of regional and national strategies for preventing and controlling environmental degradation;

(c) To promote the involvement of local populations in the formulation of natural resources management programmes;

(d) To promote the use of advanced technology and develop local skills, and to encourage their integration wherever necessary;

(e) To promote the harmonization of procedures for the collection, processing and interpretation of data from various sources;

(f) To support and encourage effective training activities at every level.

II. ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SAHEL AND SAHARA OBSERVATORY

A. Programme

9. In order to create favourable conditions for achieving its objectives, the Observatory has formulated a programme of activities.

10. The Observatory has based its approach on the work of the launching symposium, the results of the survey of 110 institutions of North and South conducted by the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO)/Sahel and Sahara Observatory (OSS) and the consultations held with various partners.

11. This programme of activities is conceived as a comprehensive, integrated initiative, based on the following four major areas:

(a) Population, natural resources and development;

(b) Water resources;

(c) Soil, plant and animal resources;

(d) Observation, meteorology, climatology: ways and means for observing the environment and disseminating information.

B. Launching of significant activities

12. As part of this programme of activities, the Sahel and Sahara Observatory has, since 1990, launched a number of significant operations.

13. In the early stages, these activities basically involve evaluating and developing current knowledge in order to avoid duplication and identify deficiencies and the real needs of the countries in question.

14. North/South working groups are engaged in carrying out these activities, which relate to the following topics:

(a) Women, environment, development: the aim is to define, by means of a subregional approach, a strategy for promoting women's participation in the use and rational management of natural resources;

(b) Integrated soil management: this initially involves the preparation, on the basis of experience and experiments, of summaries which will lead to information documents permitting an exchange of expertise on different soils;

(c) Establishment of a pastoral network in the Sahel and Sahara Observatory region;

(d) Support for a "camel" network in East Africa;

(e) Long-term environmental follow-up observatory: the objective is to identify, with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), observatories concerned with monitoring environmental changes in the three subregions of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory. This activity also involves making an inventory of information acquisition methods and of the various physical, biological and socio-economic parameters surveyed and comparing research methods and methods for ensuring compatibility and harmonization of surveys. These activities are intended to better define the problems of desertification and environmental degradation so as to assist planners in taking decisions on national and regional development and natural resources management;

(f) Water resources. Initially this involves:

- Identifying institutions responsible for water resources and their evaluation and for water resources policies;
- Evaluating national systems for the observation of surface and groundwater resources;
- Evaluating and mapping the exploitable groundwater reserves of aquifers in the major basins of the Sahara and Sahel.

Missions to identify the institutions responsible for water resources and to evaluate national systems for water resources observation are being conducted in cooperation with the World Bank, existing regional institutions (including the Inter-State Committee on Water Studies (CIEH) and the Arab Centre for the Study of Arid and Non-Irrigated Lands (ACSAD)) and national institutions;

(g) Soil resources: this initially involves assessing current knowledge of soil resources and evaluating soil degradation and soil fertility. This activity is being conducted in cooperation with the International Pedological Reference and Information Centre (ISRIC) and regional institutions;

(h) Plant resources. The initial stage involves the identification of existing materials: vegetation maps, specialized studies, inventories, information system and methodologies used by national, regional and international bodies operating in the three subregions of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory;

(i) Observation, climatology, meteorology:

- Integrated information systems and geographical information system: this activity involves establishing a pilot group and expert groups responsible for developing methods and means of comparing and integrating information from various sources obtained on a wide range of scales, from ground observations on a scale of a few square metres to satellite observations made monthly at 100 square metres and daily at 1 square kilometre. It also involves ways of analysing and integrating data on villages, catchment areas, administrative regions, countries, subregions or the entire continent. The pilot group is being designed with, inter alia, the World Bank, UNSO and UNEP;

- Pilot projects to monitor the dynamic of desertification in the three subregions: an initial feasibility study was conducted in West Africa in 1991 under the auspices of the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). A meeting of potential donors, organized jointly by CILSS and the Sahel and Sahara Observatory, will bring interested partners together through a regional project based on national components and will allow for the harmonization of various projects in the course of preparation or implementation which are being supported by France, the European Economic Community (EEC), the United States, the World Bank and UNSO;

  Two regional seminars will be held in North Africa (Algiers and Cairo) by the Sahel and Sahara Observatory and the North African Regional Remote Sensing Centre to formulate the terms of reference of a feasibility study for a subregional project, based on the same approach as in West Africa. The same approach is planned in East Africa with the Intergovernmental Authority for Drought and Development (IGADD) and UNSO, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Nairobi Regional Remote Sensing and Cartography Centre;

- Climatic variability and forecasts: two regional seminars were held in 1991 - at Tamanrasset with the Sahel and Sahara Observatory and the Algerian meteorological service and at Nairobi with the Sahel and Sahara Observatory and the Kenyan meteorological service - to identify the bases for harmonizing the meteorological systems of the countries bordering the Sahara, enhancing meteorological outputs and identifying problems relating to telecommunications and training. The activities to be undertaken in the area of climate research and forecasting are being defined in cooperation with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the African Centre of Meteorological Applications for Development (ACMAD) at Niamey in connection with the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP or "global change"), national meteorological services, regional centres such as the Regional Training Centre for Agrometeorology and Operational Hydrology and their Applications (AGHRYMET) and research institutes and universities of North and South.

III. SHORT AND MEDIUM-TERM OUTLOOK FOR THE SAHEL AND SAHARA OBSERVATORY

15. The Sahel and Sahara Observatory is continuing its efforts to firmly establish its international role, which will enable it to consolidate its functioning and attain its objectives.

A. Establishment of the organs of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory

16. At a meeting scheduled for early 1992, the various partners from North and South concerned with the Sahel and Sahara Observatory will, if they agree to it in principle, establish the following organs:

(a) A North-South international assembly responsible for approving the policy guidelines and programme of activities of the Sahel and Sahara Observatory;

(b) A permanent secretariat, responsible for promoting and implementing the programme of activities, which will replace the present provisional structure;

(c) An international scientific and technical advisory committee responsible for formulating scientific and technical proposals, opinions and recommendations concerning the programme.

B. Further activities by the Sahel and Sahara Observatory

17. As a liaison tool, the Sahel and Sahara Observatory will endeavour to consolidate the desired regional space and to pursue its mission of coordination, consultation and mobilization of its various partners. It will ensure the implementation of all activities envisaged by its programme in the field of desertification control.

Notes

1/ Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel, Intergovernmental Authority for Drought and Development, Arab Maghreb Union: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda.